

COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM AND CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING

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Why is populism so robustly associated with conspiratorial thinking? Collective
Narcissism and the Meaning Maintenance Model.

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Abstract

The current wave of populism has been characterized by visible presence of conspiratorial ideation, explanations for events that—typically without evidence—assume secretive, malevolent plots involving collective actors. In this chapter, we argue that collective narcissism, i.e., resentment for the lack of recognition of one's own group's entitlement to privileged treatment, lies at the heart of populism. We propose that when people endorse national narcissism, the belief that their national group is exceptional is continually violated by the realization that this exceptionality is not recognized by other groups. This motivates people to search for an explanation for the lack of recognition for their nation that would allow them to maintain its exaggerated image. Conspiracy theories provide external reasons why others question the exceptionality of the nation. They justify constant vigilance to threats to the nation's exceptionality and provide a reassurance that the nation is important enough to attract secretive plots from others. Antagonistic belief in the malicious plotting of others fits the general tendency associated with collective narcissism, to adopt a posture of intergroup hostility. Independently, the aversive arousal stemming from endorsing the collective narcissistic belief motivates people to affirm *any* available belief and search for *any* meaningful relations and patterns. This makes them likely to seize on *any* conspiracy theories because they offer coherent meaning systems often supported by elaborate arguments. Thus, conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking satisfy psychological needs associated with collective narcissism.

Keywords: collective narcissism, populism, conspiratorial thinking, meaning maintenance

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The present wave of populism has significantly reorganized the political map of the world. Over the past two decades populist parties have become significant political players in many Western countries: increasing their support, entering national parliaments, and taking over governments (Brubaker, 2017). An overwhelming majority of Western populist parties represents the political right-wing hostile to minorities (Eierman, Mounk & Gultchin, 2017). Anti-elitism and anti-pluralism are defining features of populism. Populism is illiberal. It undermines the rule of law and respect towards human rights (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017).

One visible feature of the current wave of populism is the increased presence of fake news and conspiratorial ideation in public discourses. Conspiracy theories are explanations for events that—typically without evidence—assume secretive, malevolent plots involving multiple actors: a mysterious ‘them’ who ‘run’ things and work against ‘us’ (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig & Gregory, 1999; Goertzel, 1994; van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014). People who hold populist views proclaim limited faith in logic, empirical evidence, and scientific experts. Instead, they believe in conspiracy theories, often contradicted by science. For example, they believe in supposedly harmful effects of vaccines or that the US government knowingly helped the 9/11 terrorist attackers. They believe that manmade global warming is a hoax, or that AIDS has been spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organisation. More generally, they believe that a single group of people secretly controls events, and together, rules the world (Lewis, Boseley, & Duncan, 2019).

Despite their varied content, a propensity to believe in specific conspiracy theories seems to be driven by the same generic tendency to form suspicions about malevolent collective agents intending to harm and undermine ‘us’ (e.g. generic conspiracist beliefs, Brotherton, French & Pickering, 2013; conspiratory mindset,

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Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; conspiratorial predispositions, Uscinski, Klofstad & Atkinson, 2016). Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that a belief in one conspiracy theory is correlated with a belief in other conspiracy theories, even if their contents vary considerably. Supporters of populist political movements tend to believe in various conspiracy theories at the same time, - even contradictory one-- and they are generally gullible (Van Prooijen, 2018).

In this chapter, we introduce the concept of collective narcissism: a belief that one's own group (the in-group) is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, but it is not sufficiently recognized by others (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009; Golec de Zavala, 2011; 2018; Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, & Lantos, 2019). We propose that research on collective narcissism allows for better understanding of the pervasive association between populism and conspiratorial thinking. We propose that populism has collective narcissism at its heart. Given that populism involves endorsing collective narcissism, the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking is fuelled by the need to compensate for aversive experience arising from the violation of the committed belief that characterizes collective narcissism.

Namely, when people endorse collective narcissism, the belief that their national group is exceptional is continually violated by the realization that this exceptionality is not recognized by other groups. This creates an aversive arousal that motivates people to search for an explanation for the lack of recognition for their group that would allow them to maintain its exaggerated image. Conspiracy theories provide external reasons why others undermine the exceptionality of the in-group. Independently, the arousal stemming from endorsing the collective narcissistic belief motivates people to affirm *any* available belief and search for *any* meaningful relations and patterns, even where

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they do not exist. In other words, when people's committed belief is violated (their group's exceptionality is not validated by others) they are motivated to search for new meaning. This makes them likely to seize on conspiracy theories, which offer coherent meaning systems often supported by elaborate arguments. Thus, conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking satisfy psychological needs associated with collective narcissism, which we explain in detail below.

We first present relevant research on collective narcissism and discuss why we think it defines populism. Next, we discuss how consequences of collective narcissism, including conspiratorial thinking, can be interpreted and predicted from the Meaning Maintenance Model's perspective (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012).

What is collective narcissism?

Collective narcissism is a positive belief about one's own group, but it is not just a belief that the group is great and something to be proud of. Collective narcissism is a belief that the group is *unique* and *exceptional*, and therefore, *entitled* to privileged treatment. Collective narcissism is not only the belief in the group's supremacy. Any reason, not only power and military might (the main bases of collective narcissism in the U.S., Gusfield, 1963; Hofstadter, 1965; Lipset & Raab, 1973), can be used to claim that the group is exceptional: its incomparable morality, cultural sophistication, God's love, even exceptional loss, suffering and martyrdom (the last three being the main bases of collective narcissism in Hungary, Forgas & Lantos, 2019, and Poland, Skarżyńska, Przybyła, & Wójcik, 2012) or the in-group's benevolence, tolerance, or trustworthiness (Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2018). Thus, the reason for the narcissistic claim to the group's exceptionality and entitlement may vary. Whatever the reason to

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claim the privileged status, the collective narcissistic belief expresses the desire for one's own group to be noticeably distinguished from other groups and the concern that the fulfilment of this desire is threatened. Therefore, central to collective narcissism is the resentment that the group's exceptionalism is not sufficiently visible to others.

Collective narcissism applies to any social group - not only the country or the nation like the concepts of patriotism or nationalism (Koesterman & Feshbach, 1989). Collective narcissism can be contrasted with in-group satisfaction or collective self-esteem, which is the belief that one's own group and one's membership in it are of a high value (Leach et al., 2008). Collective narcissism and in-group satisfaction overlap but differ. While collective narcissism emphasizes uniqueness and entitlement of the group, in-group satisfaction emphasizes that the membership in this group is a reason to be proud. Collective narcissism is preoccupied with the lack of recognition of the group's exceptionalism, while in-group satisfaction pertains to feeling happy to be the group's member. Collective narcissism without in-group satisfaction and in-group satisfaction without collective narcissism have opposite relationships with intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Golec de Zavala et al, 2019).

National collective narcissism can be contrasted with nationalism, blind patriotism or national in-group glorification: variables pertaining to assertion of national superiority. Nationalism is a desire for national supremacy and an orientation towards international dominance (Koesterman & Feshbach, 1989). While, nationalism refers to support for a dominant stance in international relations, collective narcissism reflects concerns regarding recognition of the nation's exceptionalism. The two concepts tap into discrete mechanisms underlying intergroup hostility. Central to nationalism is the desire for international dominance. People who hold nationalist beliefs demand actions that serve the purpose of achieving a dominant position in the intergroup hierarchy,

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demonstrate military, economic, and political power to bend others to the nation's will. Nationalists justify intergroup hostility as a means of achieving national supremacy (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; De Figueiredo, Jr. & Elkins, 2003; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Mummendey, Klink & Brown, 2001; Pehrson, Brown, & Zagefka, 2009). Instead, collective narcissists justify intergroup hostility as a means of achieving (or re-claiming) appropriate *recognition* for their group (Golec de Zavala, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al, 2019). While nationalistic hostility is actively aggressive and openly dominant, collective narcissistic hostility is subjectively defensive (Dyduch-Hazar, Mrozinski & Golec de Zavala, 2019). To be sure, the same atrocities may be motivated by nationalistic belief in the nation's right to dominate others and the collective narcissistic belief that the nation is not receiving special treatment and appreciation.

Blind patriotism, national in-group glorification, and collective narcissism overlap in uncritical idealization of the nation. Blind patriotism is an inflexible attachment to a country that is intolerant of criticism (Schatz, Straub, & Lavine, 1999). National in-group glorification is a belief in the nation's superiority and reverence towards national symbols (Roccas, Klar, & Liviatan, 2006). While blind patriots and in-group glorifiers emphasize the nation's cohesion and idealize all its aspects, collective narcissists see the nation's greatness as constantly undermined and emphasize its entitlement to, but lack of, appropriate recognition. While blind patriotism is related to insensitivity to and avoidance of criticism, collective narcissism is related to hypersensitivity to criticism of the nation (Golec de Zavala, Peker, Guerra, & Baran, 2016).

We believe that psychological research on collective narcissism may help elucidate why people support populist parties and politicians, and follow the conspiratorial ideation those agents spread. We believe it is collective narcissism that

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lies in the heart of all populist discourses around the world (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). In the next sections, we propose to interpret the current extraordinary increase of populism as a process in which collective narcissism became a hegemonic belief about many national identities (Lustick, 1996; 2002). Next, we focus on explaining how and why national collective narcissism is inseparably intertwined with conspiratorial thinking.

Collective narcissism and populism

Research links collective narcissism to support for populist parties and politicians in various countries in the world (for meta-analysis of the relationship see Forgas & Lantos, 2019). American collective narcissism was the second, after partisanship, strongest correlate of voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential election (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018). Its role was compared to other factors, while explaining support for Trump's candidacy: economic dissatisfaction, authoritarianism, sexism, and racial resentment. Collective narcissism was associated with the voters' decision to support Donald Trump over and above those variables (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018). In the UK, collective narcissism was associated with the vote to leave the European Union (Golec de Zavala et al, 2017). Analyses indicated that the rejection of immigrants, perceived as a threat to economic superiority and the British way of life, were behind the association between collective narcissism and the Brexit vote (Golec de Zavala et al, 2017). In addition, collective narcissism was associated with support for the populist government and its particular policies in Poland (Cislak, Wojcik, & Cichocka, 2018; Golec de Zavala, 2017; Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2018) and in Hungary (Lantos, 2018). Implications of collective narcissism in voting for populist politicians and parties suggests that collective narcissistic belief about the nation lies at the core of populist

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rhetoric. A closer look at the main characteristics of populist discourse reveals that it is constructed around the resentment that the nation's entitlement to privilege is (no longer) granted by other groups.

Populist distrust in traditional political and societal elites results in a simplistic but moralized antagonism between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elites' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2017). This essentially content-free dualism at the core of populism becomes further associated with specific ideologies that give it its particular regional manifestations. Nowadays, populism is most often associated with right-wing ideology and a belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of a native national group (Mudde, 2017). In its essence, populism represents the collective narcissistic claim for privileged treatment of ethnic nationals and those who represent the 'true' and 'pure' elements of the nation.

Populist rhetoric often follows the logic of a melodramatic jeremiad, lamentation over the lost purity of the nation, recollection of its greatness and a call for its renewal combined with the unshakeable belief that the nation is unique and chosen (Bercovitch, 1978). Jeremiad as a rhetorical tactic demands conversion to the "true" ways indicated by the "chosen" who lead the national reformation. Importantly, populist rhetoric emphasizes the division between the "chosen" or "true" members of the nation and internal opposition that threatens the plan of the national re-birth (Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2017; Sanders, Molina Hurtado, & Zoragastua, 2017). The populist rhetoric emphasizes the privileged status of those within the nation vigilant enough to see that its greatness is no longer recognized by others. It blames everyone who opposes 'the chosen' for the loss of national grandeur (Mols & Jetten, 2016). Thus, the populist message has the collective narcissistic belief about the nation's unrecognized exceptionalism at its core.

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Simultaneously holding the belief that the nation is exceptional and the belief that this exceptionality is questioned and not granted by others produces a motivational state that increases general gullibility and tendency to see patterns and meaningful relationships even among unrelated events. Thus, we can expect that collective narcissism should be associated with belief in specific conspiracy theories as well as generic conspiratorial thinking. Next, we review findings linking collective narcissism to conspiratorial thinking.

Collective narcissism and conspiratorial thinking

The association between collective narcissism and intergroup hostility is often driven by conspiracy beliefs about other groups. In an initial investigation (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012), we hypothesized and found that collective narcissism was linked to anti-Semitism in Poland because it predicted endorsing the conspiracy stereotype of the Jewish minority. Conspiracy stereotype portrays this ethnic group as particularly dangerous and threatening to ethnic Poles. In addition to being perceived as alien to Poles, Jewish people are stereotyped as dangerous, motivated by a common intention to dominate the world. Allegedly, those dominant intentions are executed by means of indirect and deceptive methods, in hidden and non-obvious ways (Bergmann, 2008; Cohen & Golub, 1991). We showed that the association between collective narcissism and anti-Semitism was mediated by the conspiracy stereotype of Jews. Thus, when Poles endorsed the collective narcissistic belief about Poland, they rejected Jews because they believed Jews were conspiring to overtake Poland by secretive means (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012).

Subsequent studies showed that collective narcissism was a robust predictor of believing in various conspiracy theories also outside of the specific context of the Polish–Jewish relations (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala & Olechowski,

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2016). We showed that Polish collective narcissism was associated with the belief that Western countries conspired to undermine the significance of Poland as a major contributor to the collapse of the Eastern European communist regimes. Poles believe that the collapse of the Communist block began with the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland in the 1980s, followed by the Round Table negotiations and the first parliamentary elections won by the Solidarity in June 1989. However, it is the fall of the Berlin Wall (which happened almost six months later) that is commonly regarded as a symbol of the end to the Communist era. Polish collective narcissism was associated with the belief that Germany conspired with other countries to deprive Poland of its due recognition for its role in Communism's collapse.

Collective narcissism also predicted the belief in Russian involvement in the 'Smoleńsk tragedy'. The 2010 crash of the Polish presidential plane on the way to Smoleńsk, Russia killed the president and 95 prominent Polish politicians on their way to commemorate Polish officers killed in Russia during World War II. Conspiracy theories of Russian involvement in the crash have been popularized by right-wing politicians and contributed to the rise to power of the ultraconservative, populist Law and Order (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) (Sieradzka, 2018, April 20). Because the presidential plane crashed in Russia, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Russian massacre of Polish officers in Katyń, beliefs in Russian involvement in the Smoleńsk crash spread quickly after the tragedy. Polish collective narcissism predicted support for those theories and for government financing the investigation into the foreign involvement in the crash (Golec de Zavalá, 2017).

In a recent investigation, Catholic collective narcissism in Poland was linked to suspicions that gender-equality activists and academics teaching gender studies secretly plot to harm and undermine family values, traditional values, and social arrangements

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(Marchlewska, Cichocka, Łozowski, Górka, & Winiewski, 2019). Such antagonistic belief in the malicious plotting of other groups against one's own group may fit the general tendency associated with collective narcissism, to adopt a posture of intergroup hostility across multiple intergroup distinctions. Such thinking provides a focused, simple explanation for why others fail to acknowledge the nation's uniqueness. It justifies constant vigilance to threats to the nation's exceptionalism and provides a reassurance that the nation is important enough to attract secretive plots from others (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018).

However, collective narcissism seems to be also associated with other conspiracy beliefs that are not clearly adversarial or assume a division between 'the true group members' and 'the worst sort'. For example, collective narcissism was linked to support for anti-environmental policies in Poland (e.g., subsidy for the coal industry or logging the primeval forest, Cislak et al., 2018). This may be because Polish collective narcissism is associated with the belief that 'Climate change' and so called 'global warming' are primarily businesses – some groups make huge money, causing people to feel scared and guilty. This association was significant over and above the role of political conservatism or support for the current anti-environmentalist government in Poland (Cyprianska et al., 2019). Thus, although some studies indicated that collective narcissism was associated with conspiracy beliefs when those beliefs were applied to the actions of other groups (Cichocka, et al., 2016), subsequent studies suggested that intergroup antagonism may not be the crucial feature that links collective narcissism to the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.

Indeed, research indicates that collective narcissism is associated not only with believing in particular conspiracy theories, but is also linked to conspiratorial thinking in more general terms, an essentially content-free tendency to believe in secretive plots

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against ‘us’ (Uscinski et al., 2016). Particular in-groups and out-groups featured in such thinking can be redefined, depending on current need and normative narrative.

Conspiracy theories need not have an obvious intergroup dimension, to be attractive when people support the collective narcissistic belief. A recent investigation in the US (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018), found that collective narcissism predicted an *increase* in content general conspiratorial thinking over the course of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, which exposed the public to many instances of conspiracist ideation.

In this study, we assessed conspiratorial thinking with the following items: ‘Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places’; ‘Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway’; ‘The people who really run‘ the country are not known to the voters’ and ‘Big events like wars, economic recessions, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.’ (Uscinski et al., 2016). We estimated two ‘conditional-change’ models in which conspiracy thinking in November 2016 was regressed on collective narcissism, while controlling for respondents’ lagged value of conspiracy thinking from July 2016. We found that collective narcissism predicted an increase in agreement with those items from July to November 2016 during the presidential campaign, over and above all other predictors and almost as strongly as political partisanship (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018).

Thus, contrary to previous findings (Cichocka et al., 2016), the findings of Golec de Zavala and Federico (2018) indicate that collective narcissism is related to belief in conspiracies involving fellow members of the nation or members of only vaguely defined collective agents. Importantly, collective narcissism is associated with the conspiratorial thinking over and above individual narcissism: a desire for continual

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external validation of an inflated self-view (Crocker & Park, 2004; Morf, & Rhodewalt, 2001). Moreover, collective narcissism is uniquely associated with conspiratorial thinking, whereas the association between individual narcissism and conspiratorial thinking is explained by the association between individual narcissism and paranoid thought that typically revolves around suspicions of malicious actions aimed at an individual (Cichocka, Marchlewska & Golec de Zavala, 2015). Thus, there is something specific to collective narcissism, not individual narcissism, that explains its association with conspiratorial thinking.

We argued that collective narcissism may be associated with conspiratorial thinking because of its proneness towards intergroup antagonism. A convergent body of findings indicate that collective narcissism predicts hostile intergroup attitudes and behaviors, especially in retaliation to offences to one's own group, both past and present, actual and imagined (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). The hypersensitivity to the threat to the group's exaggerated image associated with collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2016) may fuel a general tendency to engage in conspiracy explanations of what collective narcissists otherwise tend to believe—that their group is constantly threatened and under attack (Dyduch-Hazar et al., 2019; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Thus, conspiratorial thinking provides safe, externalizing explanations for a group's lack of recognition and provides a sense that the group is significant and unique by virtue of being a target of secretive plots and attacks. However, the reasons why collective narcissism is associated with conspiracy thinking may be broader and related to a more general mechanism of compensation of threat to a committed belief.

Collective narcissism as a threatened belief in the group's uniqueness

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We propose that the robust link between collective narcissism and conspiratorial thinking (and many other consequences of collective narcissism) is driven by a desire to compensate for the adverse arousal that follows violation of a committed belief. Many consequences of collective narcissism can be, thus, explained from the Meaning Maintenance Model's perspective (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Collective narcissism reflects the recognition that a firmly held belief (one's own group is great and exceptional) is violated by others, who do not admire the group, or do not acknowledge its privileged position. When people hold the collective narcissistic belief, they constantly experience the adverse arousal that follows violation of a firmly held belief. The motivation to reduce this arousal is robust because the collective narcissistic belief has the undermined sense of self-esteem invested in it. Research suggests that collective narcissism is a compensation for an undermined sense of self-worth (Golec de Zavala, et al., in press). Thus, the sense of self cannot be separated from the group and compensatory behaviors are more likely in face of violations that are relevant to self (Proulx & Heine, 2009).

Thus, collective narcissism reflects a state of relatively stable (as long as this belief is upheld) motivation to compensate violations to the belief in the group's uniqueness. Compensation can be executed in several different ways. One way is assimilation or changing the meaning of the disconfirming experience to better fit the existing belief. Another way is accommodation, which comprises changing the committed belief to account for the disconfirming experience (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012). Assimilation and accommodation often work together: both the incoming information and existing belief are changed to some extent so the meaning remains unchanged. Collective narcissism is related to a tendency to exaggerate threat to the group and its image (Golec de Zavala et al., 2016), to attributing hostile intentions towards the in-

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group to members of other groups (Dyduch-Hazar et al., 2019), including intentions executed in secretive ways (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). Such beliefs attribute the lack of recognition of one's own group's uniqueness to the hostility and jealousy of others. They suggest it is the group's exceptionality that attracts hostile plots. They explain how the group can be at the same time exceptional and not appreciated by others, who envy its greatness. As we have proposed, conspiracy theories provide a simple and coherent, although biased, explanation for the apparent lack of recognition of the group's exceptionality and the sense of the group being significant enough to attract conspiracies from others (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018).

Compensation for undermined beliefs can also take a form of affirmation of another, unrelated belief. Affirmed alternative belief needs not share any content with the belief that was violated. However, it should be coherent and abstract enough to dispel uncertainty. Compensation for violation to committed beliefs can also take the form of abstraction: an increased tendency to seek and recognize patterns. When people hold the collective narcissistic belief, their tendency to see patterns, plots, and conspiracies where they do not exist should increase. Affirmation and abstraction as compensation techniques explain why collective narcissism is related to belief in conspiracy theories that do not have an obvious intergroup dimension (e.g. the beliefs that climate change is a hoax) and conspiratorial thinking which is a content-free meaning making activity. Conspiracy theories provide unifying, even if false, frameworks to interpret events that are otherwise difficult to connect and explain. People who hold the collective narcissistic belief are motivated to affirm such interpretations.

Our interpretation of populism as collective narcissism allows us to formulate the hypothesis that support for populist rhetoric, politicians, policies, and parties should

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be reliably associated with belief in various, even contradictory conspiracy beliefs. We predict that populism, as well as collective narcissism, should be even more broadly associated with general gullibility (for initial evidence see van Prooijen & Krouwel, in press). Based on our research on collective narcissism, we can describe conditions that make the collective narcissistic belief about the group popular and thus, conditions that increase support for populism, conspiratorial thinking, and intergroup animosity.

Our research (Golec de Zavala et al., in press; for review Golec de Zavala et al., 2019), suggests that people are more likely to gravitate towards those who spread the collective narcissistic belief about the group when their certainty regarding self-worth is undermined, when they experience uncertainty regarding their personal significance and value: in times of economic crisis or significant societal change. A historical example of a social context that undermined individual self-esteem and led to a rise in collective narcissism was the spread of fascist ideology after the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to Adorno (1997) and Fromm (1973), the rapid expansion of the capitalist economy and then the Great Depression undercut the stability of the traditional bases to which people assessed their self-esteem. This was followed by widespread support for the fascist narrative about national entitlement.

The recent wave of populism can be linked to analogous economic and societal conditions: the 2008 Global Financial Crisis caused many people to lose the economic status to which they felt entitled. Moreover, broader societal changes towards greater equality between social groups produced a sense of lost group-based privilege. The broader societal changes in Western countries led to the empowerment of many previously disenfranchised groups such as immigrants, ethnic and cultural minorities, women, and the LGBT+ community. Their emancipation produced a sense of lost group-based privilege among members of privileged groups (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

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Such conditions are likely to engender uncertainty about self-esteem and produce a motivation, shared by some group members, to use the in-group instrumentally as a means of enhancing self-esteem (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019).

We predict that the collective narcissistic belief about the group would become popular also when the sense of pride in group membership and positive attachment to a community are diminished (e.g., via centralization of power or detachment from local community). Collective narcissism often overlaps with in-group satisfaction, which is related to tolerance towards other groups and which is unrelated to intergroup aggression (Golec de Zavala, 2011, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Due to this overlap, the association between collective narcissism and hostility towards other people because they are members of other groups is weaker (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Bilewicz, 2013), and collective narcissism becomes indirectly related to positive and prosocial emotions. Without the overlap with in-group satisfaction, collective narcissism is uniquely related to negative emotionality, self-reported lack of social connectedness, intergroup hostility, and retaliatory aggressiveness (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019).

This suggests that the positive overlap with in-group satisfaction mitigates the negative consequences of collective narcissism. It also mitigates its association with conspiratorial thinking. Without it, collective narcissism is a pretentious demand for privileged treatment and recognition of one's own group. Thus, in the longer run, capitalizing on the overlap between collective narcissism and in-group satisfaction via emphasizing the positive value of the group membership and commitment to the community may offer a route to improving the negative emotionality that underlies collective narcissism. Emphasizing the value of community, prosocial actions, positive and tolerant attitudes toward members of the same group can lower the negative

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intergroup consequences of collective narcissism. Conversely, situations that decrease the overlap between collective narcissism and in-group satisfaction are likely to make the negative consequences of collective narcissism become manifest. When collective narcissism becomes an accepted narration about the national identity and the role of in-group satisfaction is marginalized, people are more likely to turn against other groups like minorities, immigrants, or refugees and spread and believe in conspiracy theories that increase intergroup hostilities.

Conclusions

The concept of collective narcissism helps us to bridge populism and conspiratorial thinking. It offers a comprehensive explanation why these two social phenomena are so closely interlinked. People who endorse the collective narcissistic belief about their groups seek, but are rarely satisfied with, the recognition they receive for their group. As they simultaneously believe their group is exceptional and unappreciated, they experience aversive arousal characteristic for any situations in which a committed belief is violated. Thus, when people endorse the collective narcissistic belief about their group, they are continuously motivated to terminate the unpleasant emotional state arising from the violation of committed beliefs.

Conspiracy beliefs can provide multiple routes to terminate this state. They provide instant external explanations for why others do not recognize the group's uniqueness. Thus, the committed belief in the exceptionality of one's own group can be preserved in face of the disconfirming information. They also provide alternative meaning systems people can seize on, when experiencing the aversive arousal arising from the violation of committed beliefs. This explains why collective narcissism is

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related to believing in varying conspiracy theories, as well as generic conspiratorial thinking.

By stabilizing the belief in the group's exceptionality, conspiracy beliefs promote a sense of self-worth that is linked to collective narcissism. In times marked by economic upheaval or social struggle in which people experience threats to their personal self-worth, turning to collective narcissistic beliefs about the group and then, in turn, to conspiracy beliefs can be compensatory and serve to enhance personal self-worth. Regrettably, conspiracy beliefs that can be formed and utilised in an instrumental manner and have a real potential to elicit resentment among individuals who uphold a collective narcissistic belief about their group - subsequently harming intergroup relations in society.

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